

The Lucky Lawrences

... By Kathleen Norris ...

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WNU Service

CHAPTER VIII

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THEY came home on a hot Saturday afternoon, wearied, sunburned, and content from their vacation at Carmel.

"It's good to get home!" Gail said, luxuriously unpacking, undressing, bending her slender body double to brush her inverted fluffy mop.

"But I could live at Carmel forever!" Edith said.

And then suddenly there was Phil flying upstairs, and the thunderbolt of the news. Phil married! He and Lily married this morning, partly because Lily's house had burned down yesterday afternoon with all her clothes and all the children's clothes. And Phil only waiting his sisters' return to invite his wife and the three tiny step-sons into the Lawrence house for the time being, anyway, "until we can find some place. . ."

Lily helped Gail get supper that evening. Wolfe, Miles, and Daniel Cass played in the Lawrences' side yard, under the willow, where Phil and Gail, Edith, Sam, and Ariel had all played a few years ago, and their father before them.

Gail was very gentle; she was conscious of an inner trembling. There was a jar, a shock in Phil's marriage, but it was a fact accomplished now, and Phil must not ever know how his sisters felt. She and Edith must just make the best of it—Lily and the children would not be under their roof for long, anyway.

The children were round, shaggy little fellows, with Celtic blue eyes and dark hair. Dan, the three-year-old, still retained a certain babyish uncertainty of outline, his wet little mouth hung open, his face, hair, hands, were caked with dirt. His blue eyes were affectionate, hopeful. As he ate his supper he leaned comfortably against Gail's knee. Gail, peeling apples, found the feeling of the soft, warm, boneless little body rather disarming.

It seemed utterly unnatural for life to go on in its old grooves—the old grooves that were so incredibly the new. To dress and breakfast and walk to work with Edith every morning, leaving Lily Cass pretty and complacent in the home kitchen, simply was not a possible situation. Gail felt disturbed and nervous, she began to hate to go home.

"We can't stand it!" Gail said to Edith, lunching with her at the Woman's exchange.

"Well, why don't they find a house?"

"Oh, I don't believe they're even looking!"

"Why should they? They're perfectly comfortable, and you and I do all the dinner dishes!"

"Has Phil gone crazy?" Gail would ask gloomily. "What does he think we are, to put up with it?"

"You know what she said, after that very first night. Remember when she came down to the library and said, 'Phil and I intend to get out of here at the first possible moment'?"

"I remember. But then she told Sam yesterday that the house was as much Phil's as ours."

"Well, it isn't!" Edith said stubbornly and fiercely.

"I suppose it is." And Gail would shut her lips in that new, firm line, and knit her thick Lawrence brows until they almost met.

"What can we do, Gail? We can't go on like this."

"I don't know what we can do," Gail would ponder darkly. "No use in the world appealing to Phil!" she said more than once.

"Oh, no use at all."

"He told me that the cheapest place he could move to, with the

three children—and I dare say another coming—"

"Oh, Gail, no!"

"Well, I wouldn't be one bit surprised. He told me that the only decent places he could find were sixty and seventy-five, and that he simply couldn't pay it. They ran up a bill of more than two hundred dollars at Muller's, you know, when Lily's clothes were all burned up."

"I know. Invisible stockings and fourteen dollar hats!" Edith said in the pause.

"And now that Joe Cass is dead and Lily getting nothing from her people, I suppose Phil can't afford it. We never had any too much, as it was, and Phil's simply added four more persons to the list."

"You'd think," said Edith in patient scorn, "that Phil might have seen that coming!"

"I try—I really do try to be decent to Lily," Gail said after awhile.

"I try to think up things that will interest her, and be reasonable when she's helping me in the kitchen. But when I hear a thing like her telling Sam that Phil has as much right in the house as we have . . ."

Another silence. Then Gail added, very low, "Something rises up in my soul, and I feel that I could murder her!"

"I wish we could get away, Gail, you and I."

"Oh, I mean to!"

"If we could live in Carmel!"

"I know. And if we rented the corner for a gas station, and you and I had that, we could live there."

"Then that reconciles me to the gas station!" Edith said fervently.

"I suppose," Gail summarized it all somberly, "the only decent thing—the only square thing—is to make the best of it. It's one of those things that would be so darned easy—so picturesque in a book. And it's—so hard—"

The voice that to Edith was always brave and gallant faltered a little, but Gail wanted no sympathy. There was a scowl between her eyes and a gruffness in her aspect that repudiated it.

"This effort to make the best of it won't get us anywhere," she said.

Yet Edith was quite keen enough to notice the courage with which Gail carried the whole situation that night. The atmosphere, which in the three weeks since Phil's marriage had been charged with dangerous electricity, cleared. Gail was not only nice to Lily; she seemed able, with her own peculiar winning sweetness, to put herself in Lily's place. It was as if she had a part to play, and was determined to play it to its utmost limits.

For the first time, tonight, she spoke of the marriage, its suddenness and surprise. If Lily suspected some lingering trace of apology in this she gave no sign, but she brightened visibly, and the dinner table was more like its old self than it had been since the Saturday of Edith's and Gail's return.

Phil, in the fatuous blindness of love, was radiant with satisfaction, and Edith felt that he would feel that they could go on living together indefinitely—the happy family in which men are so pathetically eager to believe.

"No, he won't do that!" said Gail. "For I'm going to talk to him tomorrow, and get everything definitely settled. Then we'll only have to work toward our goal. Enough money for the smallest overhead expenses we can manage, and then you and I'll get out—out of Clippersville forever."

"I love Clippersville," Edith said dreamily. "I don't think anyone could love a place more. I always think of Clippersville as the sweetest place in the world," the younger sister pursued.

"Just the same, I'm going to get out, Edith Lawrence!"

"And just the same, I'm going with you, Abigail!"

This on a Monday, the last of September. On the Tuesday, on the Wednesday, Gail looked for her chance to talk to Phil, in vain. On Thursday Gail went home to lunch to find Edith and Lily in a glory of housecleaning. They appeared to be working together harmoniously enough, and Gail walked back to the library at one o'clock moralizing in her own soul upon the desirability of making the best of things in this curious world, putting up with what could not be changed, enduring what could not be cured.

The only way to get past certain things in life is to plunge right through them, like them—or pretend you did—learn from them, and go on to other lessons.

The early October day was somber and overcast without rain, but equally without sun. Leaves were turning restlessly in the gardens; other leaves, heaps of them, were being raked into damp, somber piles that smoked in the lifeless, ominous air and scented the world with autumn. A strange hush lay over the town; something was expected, something was drawing nearer and nearer across the great range of the eastern mountains and under the pale cool sky.

Edith and Gail almost always walked home together. But Edith was not downtown today, and Gail had no need to stop at Muller's book department as usual. It was the third, the night they called the "house's birthday," and Gail—reflecting rather ungraciously that they might as well break Lily into some of the customs of the Lawrence household, since the poor little creature appeared to be only too anxious to copy her new family's ways and ideas, stopped at the hardware store and bought twelve new drinking glasses.

"Did you wish them wrapped as a gift, Miss Lawrence?"

"Well, yes," Gail said, with a whimsical twist to the corners of her mouth. "Wrap them as a gift."

"We haven't given Phil and Lily anything," she thought as she walked on. "Well, they didn't give us any warning. Perhaps Edith and I'll make some gesture—some day, before we leave. And Ariel—Mother's poet! To have no wedding, no fun, no beauty. And not to have loved us. She couldn't have loved us, to walk out that Christmas night and send us no word—never to write."

"It's a funny world. Things seem to happen to us Lawrences. But such queer things, and in such funny ways."

The two older Cass boys—they were to be Lawrence boys soon, for Phil, in his gentle way, adored his stepsons and was eager to have them take his name—the two older Cass boys were digging contentedly down at the end of the garden where the grass was sprouting green and pale in the shadow of the heavy evergreen fence.

And then Phil in the kitchen chopping ice—chopping ice . . . ? And Lily flying down the back stairway, with a terrible face—a terrible face.

"Gail! Edith was hurt."

"Edith!"

"She fell. She struck her head."

This was Lily. She gestured with

an arm. Gail ran.

Edith was unconscious on the couch, her eyes closed. Her soft tawny hair was damp, her forehead wet. A girl—Mary Rumbold—was there, white and concerned, not touching Edith.

"I thought you were the doctor, Gail," Mary said in a still voice. "We took off her shoes," she added inconsequentially.

Gail was breathing in great spent breaths. She could not speak. Her lips moved soundlessly.

"She fell?" asked the silent, moving lips.

"No." Phil was beside his sister, his arm about her. She leaned against him, suddenly spent. "No. It was the statue—the Neapolitan Boy," he said. "One of the kids—Danny—ran against it. Mary and Edith were just going out, and Ede leaned over and caught at the pedestal—and it toppled and struck her."

"How long ago?"

"Ten minutes. We telephoned you."

"Doctor?"

"He's on his way."

"Phil—Phil—" she whispered, swallowing.

"I don't know, Gail. We don't know. Lily says that one of her brothers—"

Lily knelt beside Edith, and with her gentle, common, stubby little hands fitted an improvised ice bag on Edith's head.

"Ah, that's lovely, Gail!" Edith said unexpectedly in a clear, low, happy voice. "Are we swimming? Green—green—green water—like emeralds—wet emeralds."

She lapsed into silence again, sighing contentedly.

"She's coming out of it; it was only a shock," Phil said, frowning, with a reassuring nod and glance for Gail.

Gail was not conscious of the passing of time. She was conscious of but one thing—Edith. She must hold Edith here, by the sheer power of that sisterly love that was the strongest love in her life.

Doctor Peters was here, and Doctor Reynolds. They wanted another opinion, a man from San Francisco. Concussion, undoubtedly, and possibly fracture, but it might be that both were slight.

"Doctor Remsinger from San Francisco is coming," Phil told Gail when she emerged, white and dazed, from the sitting room at ten o'clock. "He'll be here about three. And Doctor Peters says that if Edith goes on all right until tomorrow, she's got a good chance."

The weary eyes were raised.

"Then the only thing to do is—live, until this time tomorrow."

Lily brought her warm wrapper, her slippers, downstairs, set a cup of hot coffee before her.

"Oh, thank you, Lily," Gail said, with the first honestly affectionate look she had ever given her little sister-in-law.

"Oh, Gail, if it hadn't been Danny!" Lily said, weeping.

"Poor Danny!" Gail murmured, with a steady, dry-eyed shadow of her old smile.

She went back to her post, sitting in the low chair that had been "Mother's rocker" for twenty-five years. Old Doctor Peters came and went in the quiet room. Lily was up all night; Phil and Sam kept vigil in the kitchen.

THE STORY FROM THE BEGINNING

The luck that brought the Boston Lawrences to California at the beginning of the gold rush seems to have deserted the present generation. From a 4,000-acre ranch, their holdings have shrunk to a small farm and the old family home in Clippersville. Phil, twenty-five, is in the iron works. Sam and seventeen-year-old Ariel are in school. Gail in the public library and Edith in the book department of a store. Young Van Murchison, scion of a wealthy family, returns from Yale. Dick Stebbins, Phil's friend, has the run of the Lawrence house. Ariel is sneaking out at night for joy rides. Gail, who would marry Van, feels she is making no progress in his affections. Phil suggests inviting Lily Cass, his sweetheart, to supper though Gail and Edith feel she is not "respectable." Gail goes with Van to a house party at Los Gatos with the Chipps, his uncle and aunt. She is received coldly. At a roadhouse Gail sees a drunken man with Ariel. Next day Ariel admits she was there, and displays no remorse. Ariel and the driver of another car are booked for manslaughter, as the result of an accident in which a child is killed. Dick Stebbins, who has been admitted to the bar, has the case against Ariel dismissed. Gail suddenly realizes that she loves Dick and not Van. Stebbins and Ariel elope, according to a note left by the girl.

Sometimes Edith murmured. At about two o'clock she opened her eyes, looked straight at Gail, and said, in her own smiling way, "I'll tell you, Gail. I'll go first and get the cottage ready, and be waiting for you!"

"All right, my darling," Gail's trembling, tender voice answered.

"Put that comforter over her feet, will you, Lily? She doesn't feel any too warm."

Lily had been kneeling. But she was on her feet now, and as she brought the comforter a strange expression came over her face.

"Let's say some prayers, Gail!" she said suddenly, in a frightened tone.

"Ah, as if I hadn't! And she did, too," Gail whispered back. "We said our prayers together, just as we used to, a little while ago, and she seemed so sensible; just—hungry—for them."

"Doctor Remsinger is here," Phil announced in the doorway.

"Phil!" Lily said quickly, running to her husband, catching him importantly by the arm. "Take Gail away—Phil—"

"Take?" Gail echoed. She got to her feet, looked dazedly from Phil to the doctor. The San Fran-



"We Can't Stand It!" Gail Said to Edith.

cisco physician was beside Edith. He had straightened up—had said something to Doctor Peters.

They were trying to make her leave Edith, and she would not go. She looked from face to face, terrified. Then she was conscious of choking and of seizing Phil with both frantic hands and of trying to scream.

Then the room rocked and the world rocked, and there was nothing but blackness everywhere.

CHAPTER IX

GAIL went to the strange country of grief. She saw the sunlight changed and sickly, the trees brassy and dead; the country town, where all her life had been spent, was a pasteboard town now, a place of unrealities and emptiness.

Everyone was kind to her. She was amazed at the kindness, at the pains these good folk took, to help her through the echoing, queer days. She thanked them absently, came suddenly to consciousness, confusedly thanking them again.

Letters brought her beautiful messages; she found other beautiful words in books.

"Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Grandma Polk, foremost in suffrage and prohibition and social work generally for half a century, copied out a poem for her in a trembling, beautifully clear old hand.

I shall go gently, never fear—give little warning.

Say not good-night, but in some happier sphere,

Be you good-morning.

TO BE CONTINUED